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ABSTRACT

The rhetorician Richard M. Weaver analyzed culture as profoundly ill and he viewed rhetoric as closely tied to culture. Rhetoric relies on the cultural focal point for its effectiveness; orators must operate on a basis of common, accepted, uncontested terms and premises to move their audiences, and mutual assent to a "tyrannizing image" is necessary for an orator to get premises accepted. Rhetoric serves as a cultural glue, supplying the informed sentiment necessary for the bond of community. For Weaver, culture is an expression of values, is symbolic, is exclusive and integrating, meets psychic needs, is form which equals style, is religious, is a matter of feeling or emotion, and is hierarchical and aristocratic. In Weaver's view, culture, history, and rhetoric are interrelated in a complex fashion. (DF)

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RICHARD WEAVER ON RHETORIC AND CULTURE

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Richard Weaver is perhaps most interesting at those points where he contradicts himself. I have sometimes thought it would be fascinating simply to trace down the many inconsistencies in his writings. To take just a couple of examples, he rejects Edmund Burke as a model for conservatives. Yet he praises Randolph of Roanoke, one of our most Burkean politicians. When writing about prejudices or Randolph, Weaver lines himself up with the conservatives who are traditionalists. Yet at least once he specifically repudiated the traditionalists and identified himself as a libertarian conservative. The examples could easily be multiplied, yet without necessarily lessening his stature. In fact, Weaver justifies contradictions:

> To show that a political system or a political thinker exhibits contradictions is not nearly so serious a charge. . . . I will hazard that such can be proved more or less about any comprehensive system which has ever been put forward. What the contradictions may, and certainly in many cases do indicate is that the author of the system is at grips with reality. The contradictions are not of course good things in themselves, but they are evidences of a referential relationship to the world, and they may be resolved on a higher level. They they are often signs of vitality.[1]

Vital we may agree Weaver's thought was, especially on one

of his basic concerns: the decline of our culture. Here, also, we are confronted at the outset with an inconsistency. Even a casual reading of Weaver reveals his dissatisfaction with the state of our culture. He believed the West has been in a steady decline since the time of William of Occam. He agreed with T.S. Eliot that the decline continues today, "'that the standards of culture are lower than they were fifty years ago; and that the evidences of this decline are visible in every department of human activity.'"[2]

Yet when we ask specifically how our culture is declining, we find two contradictory answers. Often Weaver tells us that our culture is disintegrating, fragmenting, descending into chaos. We find in his very first book: "For four centuries every man has been not only his own priest but his own professor of ethics, and the consequence is an anarchy which threatens even that minimum consensus of value necessary to the political state."[3] In The Ethics of Rhetoric we find the same diagnosis: "It is now a truism that the homogeneity of belief which obtained three generations ago has largely disappeared."[4] A few years later, he refers to "the fact that our world is disintegrating rapidly."[5] Further examples would be easy to produce.

On the other hand, almost as frequently we find Weaver claiming that, far from coming apart, we are being increasingly forced into the sterile mold of the mass man. In Ideas Have Consequences he warns: "it cannot be too often said that society and mass are contradictory terms and that those who seek to do things in the name of mass are the destroyers in our midst."[6]

Later in the book he claims that the advertisers' goal of happiness through comfort has been so widely accepted that it is virtually impossible to teach anything else. Our culture has deteriorated into a conformist mass with consumption as its only goal in life.[7] Some years later, he wrote:

> The questioning of apartness, the suspicion of difference, the distrust of distinction, the jealousy about allowing privacy--these are all features of a modern mentality which, often without even knowing what it is doing, may put an end to what has always been the source of culture--a particular kind of development in response to particular values. Thus the plight of the individual is reenacted on a larger scale. Not only is the single human individual being pushed toward conformity, but the individual group or culture is met with the same demand to go along, to become more like the generality, and so to give up character.[8]

Here, too, further examples would be easy to produce.

Whether our culture is disintegrating or descending into mass conformity was never resolved by Weaver. But, clearly, he believed our culture is profoundly sick. In fact, diagnosis of the ailments of our culture and their cure was a primary concern throughout his life. This led him to an analysis of the nature of culture.

Many of Weaver's works discuss culture, its functions and its constituent parts. One finds that rhetoric is very closely tied to culture. Whenever he writes of culture, rhetoric is not

far in the background, and vice versa. We will trace this relationship in several of its aspects.

All men, at all times, have fashioned for themselves ideational environments to humanize their worlds. We call these creations cultures. They are based on our capacity to create values, and are therefore very closely related to the basis of rhetoric. We "are born into history, with an endowment of passion and a sense of the ought."[9] Men collectively idealize this sense of the ought in what Weaver early in his career called "metaphysical dreams." "Without the metaphysical dream it is impossible to think of men living together harmoniously over an extent of time. The dream carries with it an evaluation, which is the bond of spiritual community."[10] Later he referred to this cultural center as

> a "tyrannizing image" which draws everything toward itself. This image is the ideal of its excellence. The forms that it can take and the particular manifestations that it can find are various. In some instances it has been a religious ritual; in others a sacred scripture; in others a literature which everyone is expected to know; codes of conduct (and even of warfare) may be the highest embodied form. But examine them as we will, we find this inward facing toward some high representation. This is the sacred well of the culture from which inspiring waters like magnetic lines of force flow out and hold the various activities in a subservience of acknowledgment. Not to feel this mag-

netic pull toward identification and assimilation is to be outside the culture.[11]

Some of Weaver's more specifically rhetorical concepts will immediately be seen to be based on the notion of a tyrannizing image that provides a culture with its ideals and goals. The analysis of ultimate terms in chapter 9 of The Ethics of Rhetoric is a clear case. The god term is the one which names the central value of the tyrannizing image. The other high terms that cluster around the god term are names of secondary values, or parts of the central value. The devil terms are the opposites, names for values antithetical to the tyrannizing image.

Consider also Weaver's treatment of the "uncontested term" in chapter 7 of The Ethics of Rhetoric. The "spaciousness" of the old oratory is based on the use of these "uncontested terms." The audiences did not take issue with these words, which so "scandalize" us today, because they named values close to the center of the image that tyrannized their times, an image we do not share with them.

The hierarchy of arguments also seems to be related to the tyrannizing image. An appeal to principle, the highest form of appeal, takes its principle from the culture's ideal. The argument from similitude is also good, for it searches for a relevant principle. Causal arguments are lower since their impact derives less from the cultural ideal than from purely pragmatic considerations. Appeals based on circumstance ignore cultural ideals, or any other kind, entirely.

We may also note Weaver's analysis of the enthymeme.[12]

Enthymemes, truncated syllogisms, rely on the audience to supply and grant the missing premises, which will often be value judgments contained in the culture's tyrannizing image.

Rhetoric, thus, relies on the cultural focal point for its effectiveness. If the orator cannot operate on the basis of common, accepted, uncontested terms and premises, he has no fulcrum for leverage in moving his audience. Without mutual assent to a tyrannizing image, the orator may never be able to get his premises accepted, "at least not as orator."[13]

While rhetoric depends on the tyrannizing image for its effectiveness, the relation is reciprocal. The image depends on rhetoric for its force. While rhetoric utilizes appeals to the values of the image, without rhetoric the image would be merely a sterile, abstract idea, unrelated to the world. The image provides the focal point for a culture, rhetoric provides adhesion to that point. This is why Weaver insists that rhetoric and dialectic must not be separated from each other. "A society cannot live without rhetoric. There are some things in which the group needs to believe which cannot be demonstrated to everyone rationally. Their acceptance is pressed upon us by a kind of moral imperative arising from the group as a whole. To put them to the test of dialectic alone is to destroy the basis of belief in them and to weaken the cohesiveness of society. Such beliefs always come to us couched in rhetorical terms, which tell us what attitude to take."[14] Rhetoric, that is, has a crucial function as cultural glue; it "supplies the bond of community, for community rests upon informed sentiment."[15] Con-

sequently, East can conclude that for Weaver, "rhetoric is the key to a culture; it is the tie that binds and affords cohesion."[16]

Weaver uses a number of terms which cluster around the word "culture." Thus we find that culture is an expression of values; culture is symbolic; it is exclusive, integrating; it meets a psychic need; it is a form, and form equals style; culture is religious; it is a matter of feeling or emotion; it is hierarchic and aristocratic. We will look at a few of these predicates and their relationship to rhetoric.

East's statement that rhetoric is the key to culture reminds one of claims by Christopher Dawson and Paul Tillich that religion is the key to culture. Weaver also recognizes a relationship between religion and culture. "A culture nearly always appears contemporaneously with the expression of religions feeling. However, the two expressions must be distinguished as follows: religion is man's response to the totality and to the question of his destiny. Through religion he reveals his profoundest intuition regarding his origin, his mission on earth, and his future state. Culture is sometimes auxiliary to this expression, but characteristically it is man's response to the various manifestations of this world as they impinge upon his mundane life."[17] On another occasion, he refers to culture's mediating function, very like rhetoric's mediation between the tyrannizing image and individuals. "Cultural fulfillment never seems complete without some kind of religious orientation. Culture has been described as a bridge between strictly religious ideas and the mundane concerns of life."[18]

In a most interesting discussion of Christianity Weaver treats the Christian religion as if it were inherently rhetorical in nature, which accounts for its historical success. He contrasts the strongly dialectical Hellenic philosophy with Christianity which "provided all that Greek dialectic left out. It spoke to the feelings, and what seems of paramount significance, it had its inception in an historical fact. The Christian always had the story of Jesus with which to start his homilies. . . . The Christians have worked through the poetry of their great allegory and through appeal to many facts as having happened, for example, the lives of the saints. Dialectic has been present, because it is never absent from rational discourse, but rhetoric and poetry were there to make up the winning combination."[19] He believed the current "decay" of Christianity as a "great support of Western culture is closely connected with the decline of rhetoric."[20]

As a culture's tyrannizing image unites a community, it does so by excluding other communities. The exclusiveness of each culture is a claim on which Weaver insists again and again. "A culture, to use a word which has certain unfortunate connotations today, operates on a principle of exclusiveness and can operate on no other. I am not referring here to any principle of class distinction or to that snobbishness with which the more cultivated sometimes look down on the less so. Those are totally different matters. The principle of exclusiveness of a culture is simply its integrity. It is an awareness of the culture that it is a unity of feeling and outlook which makes its members

different from outsiders."[21] A culture flourishes only as a unity. It "is like an organic creation in that its constitution cannot tolerate more than a certain amount of what is foreign or extraneous."[22] Consequently, rhetoric must function as a unifying force within a culture, but as a divisive force in relation to outside influences.

This is not to imply, however, that within each culture one will find a uniformly compressed mass. Quite the contrary, a healthy culture will be hierarchic, will consist of considerable differentiation oriented toward one center.[23] Consequently, a culture is inherently aristocratic, "for it is a means of discriminating between what counts for much and what counts for little."[24]

Since each culture is a unique form, it will exhibit its own particular style. "In a highly developed culture this sense of style permeates everything; it is in dress and manners, in art and institutions, in architecture and cookery. It imparts tone to the whole of society by keeping before its members a standard of the right and not right."[25]

As a culture has its own style, so also a particular style will be asking its audience to respond according to its dominating image. That is why Weaver was concerned with the deterioration of style in our time: it is both a symptom of cultural decline and a further impetus to decline.[26] This led Weaver to consider style in many areas. His dislike for jazz music and impressionist art and the obscene (in the original sense of the word) is well known. I would like to use, for illustration,

another, perhaps less well known: his criticism of the style of our broadcasters.

> Not to be overlooked in any guaging of influence is the voice of announcer and commentator. The metaphysical dream of progress dictates the tone, which is one of cheery confidence, assuring us in the face of all contrary evidence that the best is yet to be. Recalling the war years . . . who has not heard the news of some terrible tragedy, which might stagger the imagination and cause the conscientious artist to hesitate at the thought of its description, given to the world in the same tone that commends a brand of soap or predicts fair weather for the morrow? There were commentators, it is true, who got the spirit of gravity into their speech, but behind them stood always the announcer, denying by his formula of regular inflection the poignancy of their message.[27]

I am reminded of the television coverage of the San Diego plane crash. The reporters spoke in precisely the same tone of voice as if they were giving an average day's stock market report; they interviewed witnesses and survivors as if talking to a football team that had just lost a game. All of us can think of hundreds and hundreds of similar cases. Surely we must agree with Weaver that using a particular tone is asking the audience to adopt a corresponding attitude which the announcers deem appropriate. What a frightening commentary on their metaphsical dream is implied here.

Next we may turn to language itself. Weaver considered language "one of the supremely important elements in a culture."[28] Man, the animal who creates cultures, is also basically linguistic, and it is the linguistic "faculty which has enabled man to create cultures and civilizations."[29]

We are all familiar with Weaver's belief that language is inherently rhetorical, that it is sermonic. This thesis appears in his first book as well, where he refers to "a fundamental proposition of Aquinas: 'Every form is accompanied by an inclination.' Now language is a system of forms, which both singly and collectively have this inclination or intention."[30]

As cultures can be healthy or diseased, developing or declining, so also can languages. We will not detail Weaver's constant battle against the general semanticists. He believed they were out to eliminate feelings, values, tendencies from language. They would deprive language of that dimension necessary for the tyrannizing image to relate to the individual. But his concern extended far beyond the semanticists. He believed that "the English language today is losing character, s rength and resonance. What I am chiefly conscious of is the loss of resonance, and I think that this loss is owing mainly to the fact that the modern style shuns anything suggestive of value. Or, if this generalization must be qualified, it admits only values of the narrow, strident kind, such as might be expected to survive after positivism has done its work."[31]

He compares our more limited linguistic resources with those of an earlier age.

> If we seat a typical modern before a chapter of the King James Bible, or a passage from an eighteenth century oration, it is problematical how much of what is there he can get. The wonderful wealth of pleonasm, metonymy, synecdoche, antithesis, isocolons, anaphoras, inversions, and climactic orders--a veritable orchestration for the soul--is, I believe, puzzling to him. His reaction, I suspect, is that the writer of the passage is saying it the best way he could, and must be pardoned, being of a primitive time. The way to say it would be in the style of Look, or of an editorial in the New York Daily News, with words of flat signification, with syncopated syntax, and with none of the broadly ruminative phrases which have the power to inspire speculation. The essential sterility of such a style is one of the surest signs we have that modern man is being desiccated.[32]

Weaver would surely be even more dismayed by today's ads that assume we cannot follow a complete sentence, and by those who claim that ghetto English is just as good as any other.

If a society suffers a complete breakdown, its language can suffer a similar destruction. In an unpublished lecture, Weaver quotes Thucydides' account of a civil war which became increasingly bloody. "And one of the results which he is concerned to stress is that following the breakdown of community, words ceased to have their old meanings and in many cases were applied to things whose previous meanings were opposite. . . . When a

people are beside themselves, as it were, with anger and fear, the dialectic of language, which in a normal situation our conscience tells us to regard, is abandoned in favor of passion and action."[33] Weaver, of course, did not believe we have reached that crisis stage yet.

Nor did he believe that one could rescue a decaying culture simply by tinkering with its language. "Something will have to be done first about man's representation of himself, because that representation broadens or narrows the vocabulary and the rhetoric which he thinks he can use."[34] If we would attempt to heal our culture, however, we need to be aware of our own linguistic usage. "It is very easy to pick up unconsciously a tone, or to fall into a vocabulary, or to make use of figures and analogies, whose connotations are opposite to the views we really hold. Any argument goes along on a set of hidden or half-hidden premises, and there is a great if unconscious pressure to accept the premises of a style in popular use." We can, however, avoid using "the kind of discourse that carries just below its surface a contempt for all values."[35]

Finally, Weaver finds culture, history, and rhetoric interrelated in a rather complex fashion. Culture, with its myths and classes, is dependent on memory. "Clearly people cannot identify or appreciate status unless they can carry with them a memory of society's hierarchic structure and of the image in response to which it has framed itself. . . . Cultural life depends upon the remembrance of acknowledged values, and for this reason any sign of a prejudice against memory is a signal of danger."[36]

Memory, one of the canons of rhetoric, is, of course, crucial for history. If we had no memory, or a very different kind of memory, we would not have historicity as we know it.

Rhetoric, furthermore, is essentially historical. "Rhetoric begins with the assumption that man is born into history."[37] "Rhetoric depends upon history. All questions that are susceptible to rhetorical treatment arise out of history, and it is to history that the rhetorician turns for his means of persuasion."[38] The values a rhetor relies on for his enthymemes depend on memory. His examples gain their force from their historicity.[39] Weaver is perhaps clearest in insisting on this relation in the essay "Two Orators" where he praises Hayne's use of appeals which he calls "the rhetoric of history," "arguments from history," and "rhetorical-historical arguments."[40]

One of the symptoms from which Weaver diagnosed our culture's malaise is its rejection of memory. Our cosmopolitan civilization is in one sense very provincial: it consciously rejects the past. It believes the notorious dictum that history is bunk. "Amnesia as a goal is a social emergent of unique significance. I do not find any other period in which men have felt to an equal degree that the past either is uninteresting or is a reproach to them. When we realize the extent to which one's memory is oneself, we are made to wonder whether there is not some element of suicidal impulse in this mood, or at least an impulse of self-hatred."[41]

So far I have attempted to summarize Weaver's ideas on the relationship between rhetoric and culture. We can see the central role of rhetoric running like Ariadne's thread through al-

most everything he wrote about culture. How, at the end of the summary, are we to judge Weaver's ideas? I would like to make two negative comments, and one major positive one.

First, Eliseo Vivas has pointed to a basic equivocation in Weaver's use of the word "culture." In reviewing Visions of Order, Vivas found a problem in "his treatment of the nature of culture. Infecting it with incoherence is a defect that runs like a geological fault throughout the whole of the book's length. Early in chapter one, the reader becomes aware that Weaver oscillates between the sociological and the honorific meaning of the term 'culture.'" This ambiguity raises a considerable difficulty. "Weaver wanted to criticize the crisis of our world. But which of the two cultures was open to criticism?"[42] The same ambiguity may be found in Weaver's other works as well. However, it would not seem to affect his analysis of the role of rhetoric.

Second, Weaver treats cultures as far more exclusive than they probably are. I base my judgment here on the profound analyses of Christopher Dawson. Weaver seems to believe cultures are isolated monads that can only be contaminated if they contact other monads. Surely Dawson is far closer to the truth when he traces the diverse ways in which cultures can interact, even combine with phenomenally creative results. Dawson also has a much sounder analysis of the relation between culture and religion.[43] Again, this defect does not seem to affect Weaver's ideas on the role of rhetoric. At most, it would reduce the divisive role of rhetoric in relation to other cultures.

Overall, however, we must admire Weaver's attempt to rescue

rhetoric from being a dull textbook exercise or a bag of propaganda tricks and reestablish it as a fundamental dimension of humanity. We are all "born rhetoricians,"[44] he reminds us. As we are historical by nature, cultural by nature, so also are we rhetorical--and these three dimensions of humanity are closely inter-related.

Thus also the rhetorical canons he considers are raised in esteem. Memory is more than a set of mnemonic devices. It is that aspect of consciousness on which all else depends. Style is not just a list of figures and tropes to be pulled out at random, but essentially embodies the attitude, the tyrannizing image, the outlook on the world which we accept and would have others accept. And invention is not merely a dry list of topoi but the embodiment of our attitude and our philosophy in its logical forms.

One of the sets of papers from the 1978 Michigan-Indiana doctoral honors seminar dealt with rhetoric and culture. The authors believe the first task "that students of /the/ history of rhetoric must address themselves to is a specific determination of the relationship between rhetoric and culture." They go on to specify two investigations they think need to be made: first, of "cultural forms as rhetorics," and second, of "the history of cultural ideographs (i.e., words or symbols which represent entire systems of thought)."[45] In agreeing with them, I suggest that much of the ground work has already been done: by Richard M. Weaver.

NOTES

1. Richard Weaver, "Illusions of Illusion," Modern Age 4 (1960), 318.
2. Richard Weaver, "The Image of Culture," Modern Age 8 (1964), 187.
3. Richard Weaver, Ideas Have Consequences (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 2.
4. Richard Weaver, The Ethics of Rhetoric (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), p. 167.
5. Richard Weaver, "Up From Liberalism," in Life Without Prejudice (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1965), p. 154.
6. Ideas Have Consequences, p. 35.
7. Ideas Have Consequences, p. 105.
8. Richard Weaver, "Reflections of Modernity," in Life Without Prejudice, p. 111.
9. Richard Weaver, Language Is Sermonic, ed. by Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, and Ralph T. Eubanks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), p. 221. Italics in the original.
10. Ideas Have Consequences, p. 18.
11. Richard Weaver, Visions of Order (New Rochelle, New York: Conservative Book Club, n.d.), p. 185.
12. Ethics of Rhetoric, pp. 173f., and Visions of Order, pp. 223f.
13. Ethics of Rhetoric, p. 174.
14. Visions of Order, p. 225.

15. "Reflections of Modernity," p. 118.
16. John P. East, "Richard M. Weaver: The Conservatism of Affirmation," Modern Age 19 (1975), 349.
17. Richard Weaver, "The Importance of Cultural Freedom," in Life Without Prejudice, p. 15.
18. Richard Weaver, "Contemporary Southern Literature," Texas Quarterly 2 (1959), 133.
19. Visions of Order, p. 226.
20. Visions of Order, p. 226.
21. "Reflections of Modernity," p. 110.
22. "Importance of Cultural Freedom," p. 18.
23. Visions of Order, p. 189.
24. "Image of Culture," p. 192.
25. Visions of Order, p. 186.
26. "Image of Culture," pp. 197f.
27. Ideas Have Consequences, p. 103.
28. "Reflections of Modernity," p. 111.
29. Richard Weaver, "Education and the Individual," Intercollegiate Review 2 (1965), 70.
30. Ideas Have Consequences, p. 153.
31. Richard Weaver, "Individuality and Modernity," in Felix Morley, ed., Essays on Individuality (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1958), pp. 76f.
32. "Individuality and Modernity," p. 77.
33. Richard Weaver, "The Strategy of Words," address given February 13, 1962 at the Lake Bluff Woman's Club.
34. "Individuality and Modernity," p. 77.

35. "Individuality and Modernity," p. 78.

36. Visions of Order, p. 206.

37. Visions of Order, p. 223.

38. Visions of Order, p. 217.

39. Visions of Order, p. 223.

40. Richard Weaver, "Two Orators," ed. by George Core and M.E. Bradford, Modern Age 14 (1970), at pp. 231, 234, 240 respectively.

41. Visions of Order, p. 207.

42. Eliseo Vivas, "The Mind of Richard Weaver," Modern Age 8 (1964), 309.

43. See, for example, Christopher Dawson, Religion and Culture (Cleveland & New York: The World Publishing Company, 1958) and The Dynamics of World History, ed. by John J. Mulloy (New York: The New American Library, 1962.)

44. Language Is Sermonic, p. 221.

45. Michael A. De Sousa, John L. Lucaites, and Kathleen J. Turner, "Rhetoric and Culture," in H TEXNH, ed. by Richard Leo Enos and William E. Weithoff, pp. 10f. Italics in the original.